

## Tender by [fandammit](#)

**Series:** [In Between Years](#) [1]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Gen, Post S2, dad!hopper feels

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**Characters:** Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler

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**Summary:**

His first name is Jim but she hasn't really ever heard anyone call him that, except for once on the phone when she picked it up without thinking. Besides, she doesn't like the way that word feels in her mouth, cold and weird like an untoasted eggo.

Everyone else calls him Hopper, but she doesn't want to be everyone else. There's something about what she calls him that should be different, she thinks.

But she also knows that he's already been a dad, once, to Sara, who is gone now. She's not sure he can just pick up being a dad again the way she picks a new sweater.

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El tries to figure out what to call Hopper, post s2.

## Tender

It's Thursday night dinner at the Byers house and she's curled up in the corner with a book.

Mike and Will had begged her to play Dungeons and Dragons with them, and normally she'd play, but she's on the last third of this book and she wants to finish it and give it to Nancy before they all go home, so she just shakes her head and retreats into the chair in the corner.

Halfway through the last chapter, an argument explodes in the middle of the room between the boys.

She waits for it to quiet back down -- it's hard to concentrate on the words on the page when Dustin is screaming "son of a bitch" every other sentence and Lucas is just screaming.

Two minutes later, when it seems like the noise has only gotten louder, she puts her book down and wanders towards the kitchen, where Jonathan and Nancy are washing the dishes and putting them away.

Nancy smiles at her, then gestures towards the increasingly loud argument in the living room.

"Want me to tell them to shut up so you can read?"

Before she can respond, she hears the front door open, the heavy tread of boots on the floor.

The argument immediately stops.

It's silent for a long moment and she can't help but smile as she pictures the glare the boys must be getting right now.

Someone -- Lucas, she thinks -- cough before she hears Dustin say, "Sorry -- we'll shut up."

The door swings back shut just as Nancy bursts into laughter, the sound echoing in the silence as she leans into a smiling Jonathan.

"It's like he's everyone's dad instead of just yours," Nancy says, grinning over at her.

The smile fades, and she looks back towards the hallway, turning the words over in her mind.

She hasn't called him dad yet -- hasn't really called him by any name. When it was just the two of them, she didn't have to call him anything. She could just talk and he would know it was for him.

But now there are so many people in her life. Not just Mike and Will and Lucas and Dustin, who she sees every Tuesday and Wednesday after school is out to help her get caught up, but Nancy and Jonathan and Joyce -- sometimes even Steve and Max, too -- who are there for Thursday night dinner at the Byers.

She knows she has to call him *something*. But the right name never seems to come to her.

Not Chief, because he's never been that to her. Not Hop, which a name only Joyce uses and seems special, somehow.

His first name is Jim but she hasn't really ever heard anyone call him that, except for once on the phone when she picked it up without thinking. Besides, she doesn't like the way that word feels in her mouth, cold and weird like an untoasted eggo.

Everyone else calls him Hopper, but she doesn't want to be everyone else. There's something about what she calls him that should be different, she thinks.

But she also knows that he's already been a dad, once, to Sara, who is gone now. She's not sure he can just pick up being a dad again the way she picks a new sweater.

She feels a hand on her shoulder, and looks up to see Nancy looking down at her, concern on her face.

"Hey, El, are you ok?"

She taps the table in front of her.

"He was a dad -- before. With Sara." She twists her hands in front of her, looking away from Nancy's wide look of surprise. "But she's gone now."

It's not -- it's not what she means to say, and she knows it doesn't quite explain it, but Nancy is kind and smart and seven months of Thursday night dinners and Saturday morning waffles means that she understands what El is saying anyway.

Nancy clears her throat and El sees her glance at Jonathan in that way people do when they were really saying that they'd talk later about something important.

"That doesn't mean he can't be your dad though, El." She runs her hand through El's curls. "You know that, right?"

She doesn't say anything, just looks down, counting the cracks in the wood underneath her fingertips.

"We're not like you and Will," she finally says to Jonathan. He frowns slightly, glancing up at Nancy before tilting his head in El's direction.

"Related, you mean?"

She nods.

He shakes his head, a look on his face that she can't quite describe with the words she has -- something like sad and angry put together, something that looks a little bit like he's wondering something in the back on his mind.

"That doesn't matter. I mean, not really." He sits down in the chair across from her. "It's obvious to anyone that he thinks of you as a daughter -- and not just because a piece of paper says it. He cares about you. He - he'd do anything for you. To, you know, make sure you're ok and that you're happy." He hesitated, then reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Trust me when I say this -- being a dad is about more than being related."

She meets his eyes, serious and honest in a way that she knows she can trust, and nods.

“Do you think I could call him that?” She says the word slowly, trying it out. “Dad.” She likes the way it sounds.

Nancy smiles at her.

“I think he’d like that a lot.”

She thinks about that as they say goodbye to the rest of the boys, as she hugs Mike, as Nancy comes over and gives her a kiss on the forehead. She mouths the word in the dark, too nervous to say it out loud.

“You ok?”

She turns towards him, towards her - her dad. Nods, but didn’t say anything.

“You need anything before we head home?”

She bites her lip, thinking, then looks over at him, hopeful.

“Ice cream?”

He draws his brows together.

“Really? It’s 10 degrees outside.”

She nods and lifts her shoulders as if to say -- you asked.

“Cookies and cream, please?”

He stares at her a moment longer before he chuckles and nods.

“Alright, kid. But only because Nancy told me that’s the fourth book you’ve finished in the last two weeks.” He smiles over at her. “I’m proud of you.”

She smiles back at him, then straightens up to look directly at him.

“Thanks...dad.”

She heard him suck in a breath and saw a look of surprise and something else, something she didn’t have the word for yet, cross his

face.

She swallows, her tongue feeling thick in her mouth, a rush of anxiety coming up from her stomach. She tries it again.

“Dad?”

He clears his throat and looks away for a second, brushes a hand across his face before turning back to look at her, that same undefined look on his face.

It’s something different than happy but...related.

Tender, she thinks, the word rising up from the depths of her mind. A word that sometimes means soft, and sometimes means kind. It’s the perfect word for that look, which has a little bit of both.

She bites her lip.

“O - ok?”

He smiles at her, his eyes bright even in the dark of the truck.

“Yeah, kid, that’s ok.” He laughs, and she’s a little confused it sounds a little shaky. She feels better, though, when he reaches across the seat and squeezes her hand. “That’s definitely ok.”